

Q: Good afternoon. Today is September 24th, 2018. My name is Elizabeth Lund and I'm here at the Newton Free Library with Judith Siporin. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks oral history project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. Judith, welcome.

A: Thank you very much. I'm glad to be here.

Q: How long have you lived in Newton?

A: I've lived in Newton since 1957, so that would make it 61 years--61 years total, but I was sort of away for college--not very far away--in the 70's, and also did my graduate work in English in--far away in England for two years. So apart from that I've been in my childhood home and still am there.

Q: How wonderful. Why did your parents move to Newton?

A: So, neither of my parents are from around here. My mother was born in New York City and my father was also born in New York, but when he was a baby the family moved to Chicago. And they were both children of immigrants from Eastern Europe, and they both came from politically left-leaning backgrounds. And my mother was a union organizer. She had been sent to Chicago to organize unions, where she met my father. And then he was an artist and in the war--he was a war artist, actually. And he was--after the war returned home, they were married, and he was--he had always made his living as an artist, and in the 50's he was offered his first real job at Brandeis University, which was just beginning then. He was offered the job of starting an art department there, so that's why they moved to--first to Boston. And at first they lived in apartments in Brookline. So for my first six years we lived in an apartment near Cleveland Circle, and then they moved to Newton. It was the first time either of them had lived in a real

house with any land. They had been brought up in in poor tenement buildings. So my childhood was entirely different from theirs, really radical change.

Q: So what part of Newton did you and your family call home and what was the neighborhood like when you moved here?

A: So we moved to Newton Corner about two blocks from exit 17, and it's a neighborhood that's really very different from the busyness of Newton Corner. And when we moved in, it was a street with a lot of houses that were very dilapidated. They were mostly owned by, like, old New Englanders. Many of the people were from old New England families and on the whole the children had grown up. The house we moved into was very dilapidated on the outside. It was--you could hardly get up--the porches were totally rotten. You could hardly get up the stairs. No paint on the outside. But inside it was very well-kept and the garden was fantastic. The woman who lived there was a marvelous gardener and she had been widowed early on. And she--in order to make ends meet, she ran the house as a boarding house. So the second floor was--she rented on one side. The house easily divides in two. Half of the second floor was rented to a minister and the other half was rented to an elderly lady. Each of them had--it was sort of like little suites. And then she and her daughter moved to the third floor. They lived up there, and she cooked for everybody.

And so--generally those houses were drafty. They were getting to be a little rundown, and they were considered--it wasn't fashionable to live in Victorian houses in the 50's. Everybody really was looking for modern, split-level kinds of houses. And so people with--we didn't have a very large family, it was just me and my sister, but all around us people were moving in with very large families. The people across the street had six kids, next door were four, and across our brook was a family with five. So just those new families were enough to make quite a crowd of children on the street.

Q: It sounds like a great place to be as a child. What kind of games did you and your friends play?

A: So we were a really tight-knit group and we spent a lot of time together. And in many ways I feel as if my social world was really focused on that neighborhood rather than at school. And I actually felt as if that was--those were the people I really belonged with, was this group of people in the neighborhood. And we played a lot of different kinds of games together.

First of all, it was--a lot of the activity was outside. We spent a lot of time out of doors, and what we mostly did was we would come in for dinner, eat quickly, and go back outside as soon as possible. And there was always something going on without adult supervision. The adults didn't manufacture the--you know, didn't supervise the games or arrange them or interfere in any way. It seemed as if it was like a world that belonged to the kids.

And we did play sports. We had big softball or baseball games. One thing that was interesting was that boys and girls in our neighborhood weren't segregated. We didn't go our separate ways. We all played together. And we had big neighborhood baseball games and if you had--you know and we would play in yards. So I should just say that the yards are rather large and there aren't fences for the most part. So--and we were always in one another's yards doing different things, so there wasn't the idea that it was like private property and you couldn't go, including people who didn't have kids. Like we went sledding all winter long, because it was the best hill, down the neighbor's yard and they didn't have kids. And it just seemed to be okay for us to do that.

So we had baseball games where everybody played and that--I just remember great disputes where there would be big arguments if something was fair or foul, and there would be these heated arguments and people in the outfield would get enraged and they would have what was called a "sit-down strike" is what they called it. And everybody would sit down in the field and refuse to play ball.

Then we played some games that seem, now when I'm talking about it, seems, I know really old-fashioned, but we played marbles. We had--next door there was a big old apple tree behind a barn, which is actually still standing--it's a barn that was built like pre-Civil War. And the--we scooped out a hole where you had to be--in marbles you call it baptized--you have to get into the hole before you can go after other people's marbles. We would play these tournaments.

Then we'd play made-up games, like interesting invented games that were just imaginary. So we played Indians, but it wasn't like cowboys and Indians where there were wars and shooting. We were Indians and we--one year my mother had made Halloween costumes for me and my sister that were supposed to be Indian women costumes. I don't know how she invented these costumes, but anyway, she did. And so we wore those and I remember we built teepees and we divided up into different Indian families, and somebody had a big pot and was stirring the pot. So they were very imaginative games and those went on for days. The teepees stayed up in the front lawn and people would go and have a night's sleep and go back out again if it was Saturday.

And then we also were big stamp collectors and the boys across the street were also stamp collectors, and we used to bring our albums over and the stamps would get all spread out and we would trade our duplicates with one another. But it was a kind of playing that I don't know if children do that anymore. And of course I mentioned the sledding all winter long.

Q: I know you have many vivid memories from childhood. Would you share one that really stands out for you?

A: Well one that is very vivid to me is probably the earliest thing that I can remember when we first moved in to our house. And that was...I remember it was very, very cold that day, and I was--so I was six years old, and my new neighbor next door, who was also six, he volunteered to take me for a walk around the neighborhood and show me things. So we took a walk--I didn't

know where I was going. I didn't recognize anything. And we took a walk up--there's a brook that is at the bottom of our yard, Hyde Brook, and it goes quite a ways. If you go up the street, all the houses along the street have Hyde Brook at the bottom. And if you follow the brook up, eventually you get to this area which is called the Dell, and it's all wooded. There's nothing built in it, and it's really beautiful. And it's quite wild--it's still that way now. And we were walking in the Dell--he wanted to show me the Dell.

And it was really, really cold--it was like winter weather, and I had not put on mittens. My hands were really, really cold. And so he was six years old, but he was this really chivalrous fellow--he gave me his mittens. And then I remember that he said that these boys were going to chase us. And I turned around and I saw that there were these--they looked like high school kids. And we were both really terrified and they were--it seemed like they were following us. Now, I don't know if this was true or if we just had vivid imaginations. We used to call the tough kids from the high school--for some reason we called them the "ruggies." I don't know where the term came from, but we said they were the ruggies and they were chasing us. And I just remember the terror of being in this--it was really quite a wild place, with the boys. It seemed like maybe they were just walking home from school and it was totally innocent, who knows. But I just--that's my first vivid memory of Newton, that it was a--you know, because I was used to apartment living, and the only land we had around us was a little courtyard. It was nothing.

Q: What was it like going to school in the 1950's?

A: So perhaps I'll talk about the 50's and a little bit about the 60's too, because it's sort of a piece. But it was a really an oppressively conformist culture. You really--you had to be a certain kind of person. There was not what they call "diversity" today. The term is used all the time, but...It was--in our part of Newton, anyway--although Newton has a large Jewish population, it was very--there were very few Jewish kids, and my family is Jewish. In the Newton Corner school where I went, there were very few. And of course every--now, I'm sure this is true of all public

schools, not just Newton--but every day you always saluted the flag, said the Pledge of Allegiance, and you always prayed, because at that point there was no separation of church and state. And you--I think my way of getting through school was--you couldn't sound too smart, you couldn't be intellectual without being teased, and I was kind of a bookish kid. So it was kind of oppressive.

And I know Newton has a great reputation for schools and for a fine education, and my son certainly had a great experience at Underwood, which was my school. But when when I went there, there were a lot of teachers who were quite elderly who'd been there a long time, and who were kind of Dickensian...a little bit monsters. My sixth--not my sixth grade, but my sister's sixth grade teacher, Miss Lynch, was famous for what she called "the cold water treatment." And if boys talked and wouldn't be quiet or did something bad, she would actually take them by the scruff of the neck and hold their heads underwater in the boys bathroom. So my idea of how to get through school was to be really quiet, not make any trouble, just be as good as possible, which I don't think is the best way to think about what it is to be in school. It wasn't to be outspoken and to ask questions and things like that.

So it also was a time when the basement had signs up saying "This is a bomb shelter," because we were worried about the atomic bomb. We had rehearsals--I'm sure all schools did this--rehearsals for what to do if an atomic bomb was dropped. We were told to get under our desks and put our heads down, as if that could save you.

And then in sixth grade, one of the things that made me happiest of all was to be chosen to be a safety patrol, which meant that you helped cross kids at the corner of the street. You had your post, and I received a badge--a belt and a silver badge that I wore every day. And I loved having that responsibility, crossing the kids at Church and Eldridge. In elementary school we also went home for lunch every day, which was of course possible because most of the mothers didn't

work. And that actually was always a pleasure, to go home for lunch and just have a little break and go back replenished.

And then in the 60's I was at Bigelow, and I also remember that as quite a repressive place, also. So some of my memories are not so happy about school, and that's why I think maybe the freedom of the neighborhood made such a difference. When I say oppressively regimented, you couldn't have long hair if you were a boy, you couldn't wear pants if you were a girl--ever--to school, and if you got interested in wearing short skirts, the assistant principal measured your skirt. So they had to be a certain number of inches below the knee, or else you got sent home. So that's why I was very happy to be able to go to the Murray Road School for my last two years of high school.

Q: How did the Murray Road School impact you?

A: So I'll just say a bit about what it was, because not everybody knows what it was. So the Murray Road School--this was the late 60's, and I think a lot of people--a lot of students in the high school were--felt the way I just described. It was a time of the beginnings of student protest against the war in Vietnam, and just the sense that people wanted change. That was the climate, generally.

And so the Newton public school system did something which is really, I think, kind of amazing. They decided that they were going to offer the use of an empty elementary school--the Murray Road School, which I think is in West Newton, getting towards Auburndale. I actually haven't been there in many decades, and I don't know if it still exists as a building anymore. But it was an empty building. It had been an odd elementary school because it only went up to third grade, and everything in the building was geared for tiny people. So it wasn't--we had--the toilets were low, the mirrors were--you had to stoop down to see yourself in the mirror. And they let anyone who wanted to go in my year--it was--we were the first year in high school to use it. We were

11th graders, and they said anybody who wanted to go could go there. It was going to be an experimental school, and a group of very good teachers from the high school who were interested in that kind of thing had volunteered to go there to teach, and were very excited about it. And it became a very interesting educational experiment, not always successful for everybody, for various reasons, because it depended upon students being very self motivated.

And the idea was that the students were going to invent the school. They were going to decide on--for the most part--on the curriculum, except for everybody by state mandate had to take U.S. history. That's the law. But you could introduce classes you wanted to take. You could invite somebody to come and teach. If you didn't go to class, you didn't get into trouble. A teacher was likely to talk to you about it and try to find out what was wrong, but you didn't get detention, you didn't--your parents weren't called. You could play bridge all day long or frisbee out in the yard.

But there were a lot of very intelligent kids who went there, who were interested in doing things like--I remember we had a class, an English class, that was on Hamlet and Macbeth for the entire year. And kids were interested in doing that. So that was pretty good. We had general meetings to discuss what to do about certain problems in the school, where we discussed with our faculty. We were treated almost as equals. So that was an interesting school to go to, and I think it was a very

important experience for me partly in drawing me out and making me feel--instead of hunkering down and feeling like an outsider. I think many of us felt like we had been outsiders in a conventional school, and we felt as if we really belong together. There were a hundred of us. And at graduation I remember we didn't have--we didn't go to Newton High School graduation and we didn't wear black robes. We wore our scruffy hippie clothes and we had what was called "the ritual," where we carried candles at night. And we made up our own diploma with important quotations that had meant a lot to us.

So I do have happy memories of it. But I think for some kids it was a waste of time. I think that they didn't--they just didn't really use it to get an education, although they might have learned a lot about themselves.

Could I just say one little thing more? One really interesting thing that we did to start school I thought was a great project, and that was to get us to meet one another and to learn collaboration we had to form--everybody in the school had to form themselves a theater group and decide on a play and decide who was going to act and who was going to direct. And for the first I think it was a couple of months of school that was the major project. And I was in The Glass Menagerie and I remember we had a big theater night where everybody performed for everybody all the plays we'd been working on. And that sort of set the tone for the school for the next--I went there for two years and my sister went for two years after me. And it existed for only ten years.

Q: How has Newton Corner changed over the years?

A: So it's changed drastically, mostly because of the coming of the Turnpike, and...It used to have a great many businesses owned by individuals, so you got to know the individuals. You knew the man who owned a little grocery store and...Now, there really--although I live two blocks from Newton Corner, there's no errands that I do there. There's nothing--there's no reason for me to go there, and it's also very dangerous. The traffic is very, very dangerous, and there's nothing really for recreation either. There's--the movie theater's gone and so on.

My neighborhood, you would--although it's two blocks from the Pike, you would never know--you would never think you were near the Pike. And as I was saying before, it used to be a house--a neighborhood with houses that were kind of ramshackle--houses that were good for bringing up a big family. But they were they were not kept up in a fancy way. And everybody mowed their own lawn. So it's much more affluent now. You--I never see a kid playing in the street. I don't mean like, in the street, I mean on the street, you know, in the yards. There's no

kids. There are kids in the houses, but they're not out there the way I was describing, as a neighborhood gang. That doesn't exist. The houses are much fancier and there's lawn guys--hired lawn guys who come and mow the lawns--big change.

Q: How do you think your son's childhood in Newton Corner was different than your own?

A: So it was very different for a lot of the reasons that I've been talking about. First of all, there was no neighborhood playing, so--and I think this is typical, that adults arranged what is now called "play dates." But we just played all the time and there was always a ready-made gang out there. So that was arranged.

Then of course we had--we were working parents, and we were teachers, both of us, so we were away at school--our school--all day long from--we had to leave early in the morning and we didn't get home usually until 5:30 or 6:00. So thank goodness for the marvelous after-school program at the Underwood School, which was just terrific. And my son's social life really was concentrated in the after-school program.

Also Underwood School became the friendliest place. When I was a parent, it was nothing like the--there were no monster teachers. There was a very, very friendly atmosphere. When I would bring my son in in the morning, the parents were encouraged to hang around in the hallway and chat for a bit. It was never that way--I mean, my parents were never in the school when I was growing up. We just walked to school--we would just be on our own. So that was different. And I would say also that my son still felt sort of like a loner in middle school, just the way I did. And the thing that saved him was the totally marvelous music program run by Greg Livingston. My son became a musician, actually. But it was Greg Livingston who used to have jazz--for kids who were interested, they would get there at something like 6:30 or quarter to 7:00 in the morning and have jazz band. So that was really something marvelous for him that was different for me.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience in Newton?

A: Yes. I'd just like to say something about my garden. So, growing up in a neighborhood where--certainly it's a suburb, but it had unusually--as I mentioned--unusually large yards, and we inherited a really remarkable garden from the woman who lived in the house before us. And it was really beautifully planted. And so I grew up with a--and if you look at the land you can imagine what Newton must have been before this century, because it actually is declared wetlands. It has the brook that runs through it and you can see that the street is high up, and then there are the houses, and then on both sides--so it was like a ridge running through. And on both sides the land slopes down into, like, a valley. And the Dell that I was describing is in that valley further up.

So I grew up, I think--it's strange to say--in a suburb, but with a real sense of nature that came from the garden. And very early on I became interested in gardening. And first the idea was just to preserve what had been planted there already, but I became extremely interested in it. It's been a lifelong interest of mine. And learning about plants from that--from a very, very early age, from taking care of it. And it just kind of took hold of me and it's something that I think has affected my whole way of looking at life also, because when you plant something it's for the long-term. And I've been in the garden for now over 60 years, and it's not like the way people think about landscaping now--it's like installations. And there was no garden--the company comes and puts in the garden and there it is overnight. And this very different idea of nurturing the land for decades and watching the way it changes over that long period of time. And also with its natural features like that brook that goes to the Charles River.

Q: Well it looks like our time is just about up. Is there one more thing that you would like people 100 years from now to know about your experience in Newton?

A: I don't know. I think maybe my last remark about the persistence of the marvelous natural qualities that the land that Newton is built on has, and that groups like the Newton Conservators have made great efforts to preserve. And it's important to develop as a modern place, but it's also important to preserve what was given to it naturally, and not to lose sight of that.

Q: Those are very important, insightful remarks. Thank you so much for taking time to do this with us. We are really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks oral history project.

A: Thanks very much.

END OF INTERVIEW